

Moonlight Mourning
by Lesley L. Smith

When I got home from class, my elderly next-door neighbor, Brittani, was lying in wait for me on her sagging front porch. "Yoo, hoo! Mabel!" she said, gesturing me over. She had on her yard work outfit, a giant floppy straw hat, an ancient flowered blouse, and stained khaki pants.

Reluctantly, I set down my bike and ambled over. "Yes. Do you need help with something?" No doubt it involved climbing or heavy lifting.

"No, honey. I wanted to help you this time. Can you join me for dinner?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks, but I think I'll just turn in early. I'm worn out." I'd been exhausted for weeks.

Brittani shook her head. "But, Mabel, honey, tomorrow's the Vernal Equinox."

I was well-aware of that, since my roommate Gertrude had taken the maglev train down to New Mexico to celebrate with her family. She still had a family. I forced a smile. "What's your point?"

"You have to go to Moonlight Mourning tonight," Brittani said. "Because of your folks."

I didn't need my neighbor to remind me that my parents, my only living relatives, died a month ago in one of the many Mississippi floods. "I can't face it, precisely because of my folks."

"Mabel, please join me for dinner. I'm worried about you. You haven't really dealt with their loss."

My stomach grumbled, and I knew I didn't have any groceries to speak of. "Well...." Maybe I could get a free meal and then not go to the ceremony. She'd never know.

"It's settled." She grabbed my hand. "Come on inside."

I had to hand it to her; she put on quite a spread even on a power-restriction day. We ate at the picnic table on her back patio. She set it with a pretty table-cloth and lots of home-made candles. They flickered in the evening breeze, perfuming the air with the scent of beeswax.

I eagerly loaded up my plate. "Is this meat?" I asked biting into something brown.

She nodded. "It sure is; this is a special occasion."

Wow. I couldn't even remember the last time I had meat. "Thank you. It's delicious." I chewed slowly, savoring every last morsel.

All too soon the meal was over, and I pushed myself back from the table. "Thanks again, Brittani. I owe you one."

She started clearing the dishes. "Then go to the ceremony. If we don't celebrate and remember people we've lost, how can we truly celebrate the Vernal Equinox and look to the future?" Brittani asked. "You have to ride. Go get your bike. I'll watch the procession from here."

I was finding out it was difficult to talk Brittani out of anything once she'd made up her mind.

As I pedaled downtown, the sunlight reflected off the clouds, painting them golden, pink, and finally red. The sun had just set when I reached City Hall, and stars were beginning to appear in the eastern sky. Town Square was jammed with black-clad bike riders. I looked down at my jeans and t-shirt; I should have changed.

"Welcome!" the Mayor, a middle-aged gray-haired woman, yelled out. "Happy Vernal Equinox!"

"Happy Vernal Equinox!" the crowd boomed back to her.

"Do we have any new riders this year?"

A smattering of hands went up in the large crowd.

"Good. Then I'll give the long version of the speech." She cleared her throat. "As you all know, tomorrow is our Vernal Equinox. It is the first day

of spring, a day of hope and renewal. We will make Earth healthy again some day if we all work together."

The crowd cheered.

"But tonight, on the eve of the Vernal Equinox, all of earth's citizens look back on the mistakes humans have made so we do not repeat them. We will stop global warming, not ignore it."

"We will stop global warming," the crowd chanted. "We will share our food and water and medicine, not fight over them."

"We will share, not fight," we chanted.

"'Why moonlight?' some of you youngsters may ask."

"Why moonlight?" a couple people in the crowd yelled and the rest of us alternately groaned or chuckled.

"I'm glad you asked." The mayor shot us a smile. "Many places are simply too warm for their citizens to carry out the procession during the day. We ride at night so all our brothers and sisters around the world can ride with us, as the same moonlight guides us all. Every person on Earth is united tonight in our sincere vow to restore Earth."

"Every person on earth is united tonight," the crowd chanted and I whispered as I wiped a tear out of the corner of my eye.

"Why bicycles?" someone in the crowd yelled.

The mayor nodded. "'Why bicycles?' you may ask. We resolve to get around under our own power. We will not use fossil fuels that release greenhouse gases."

"We will not release greenhouse gases," the community surrounding me agreed.

I repositioned my bike against my legs.

"Now, I will read the Mourning Statement. Afterwards we'll have the moment of silence and commence the traditional silent bike ride around town." She cleared her throat again. "We gather tonight to mourn and remember the millions of extinct insect, plant, and animal species and the billions of people lost in the last century through direct and indirect effects of global warming."

"We mourn and remember," the crowd chanted. In many ways it was a diverse bunch; ages ranged from eight to sixty-eight, and skin tones included all the myriad possible mixtures of brown, tan, pink, red, yellow, black, and white. We were homogeneous, however, in our fervent hope that planet Earth could be healed before it was too late.

"We remember the peoples and cultures of the Coral Atoll Nations, drowned by the rising oceans. We regret their nations are gone forever."

"We mourn and remember," we all repeated.

"We mourn and remember the millions of people lost in Europe from tidal waves and flooding. We regret that so many cultural landmarks and treasures have been destroyed by the advancing waters."

"We mourn and remember."

"We mourn and remember the millions of people lost from flooding, mud slides, and tidal waves in Africa. We regret that so much of the cradle of mankind is gone."

"We mourn and remember."

"We mourn and remember the millions of people lost in Asia and the Middle East from tsunamis, flooding, and mud slides. We regret that mankind's most ancient cultures have been lost under the seas."

"We mourn and remember."

"We mourn and remember the thousands of people lost via tsunamis and flooding in the countries of the South Pacific. We regret that most of these unique cultures have been demolished by the advancing waters."

"We mourn and remember."

"We mourn and remember the millions of people lost in tidal waves, mud slides, and widespread flooding in the Americas. As long as human culture

exists we will honor the memories of these lost relatives, friends, and neighbors."

"We mourn and remember."

"We mourn and remember Alaska, Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, and Hawaii and regret that they were buried under the advancing oceans. They were beautiful and integral parts of our great nation."

"We mourn and remember."

"We mourn and remember the millions of people from all around the world that succumbed to starvation and dehydration because of shifting weather patterns and the ensuing droughts and crop failures. We mourn and remember the millions of people around the world that fell due to widespread diseases caused by the shifting ecosystems of our warming world."

"We mourn and remember."

"And finally we mourn the wonderful family members, friends and neighbors we lost this year to disease and floods. They will never be forgotten."

Finally acknowledging my parents were gone hit me harder than I expected. "We mourn and remember." Despite my best efforts, my eyes filled with tears as memories of my mom and dad came tumbling back. They were so thrilled when I got into one of the few surviving colleges, and so sad when they said goodbye after helping me move here--although they tried to hide it. "They will never be forgotten," I whispered.

The Mayor's statement was met with respectful silence. A warm Chinook wind ruffled my hair. After a minute, the Mayor picked up her bike by the podium and started riding out of Town Square. The folks closest to her got on their bikes and followed her out. Bike by bike, we followed them, an eerie silent river of people winding through town. The full moon lit our way, the only sound the thudding of wheels on pavement.

We passed groups of people standing on the edge of the road, mostly little kids and the elderly, people who couldn't ride. They saluted us as we rode by. Some of the children seemed confused, but the old folks stood stoically at attention. Most of them, even the old men, had tears streaming down their cheeks. I looked away, and tried to focus on pedaling. It was so sad and unfair that so many people, including my parents, had to die because of the carelessness of past generations.

I could barely see where I was going with the tears pooling in my eyes. I had sworn to myself I wouldn't do this; it was too upsetting. We needed to put all this in the past and look to the future. But how can we move forward when so many people have been left behind?

After our first lap around town, I left the diminishing procession when it passed my house. Brittani stood outside waiting for me. She gave me a hug when I disembarked from my bike.

"I'm proud of you, Mabel," she said. "I know that wasn't easy for you." I was drained. "I just can't believe they're gone. Now I have no family left."

Tears snuck into Brittani's blue eyes. "Me neither. These times are ...tough."

I took a step back, taking in her wispy gray hair, laugh lines, and soft full cheeks. "Maybe you could be my family and I could be yours?"

She reached out to rub my back. "That sounds like a plan. I would be honored."

"Me, too."